

PRELIMINARY CHAPTER

THE THONGA TRIBE

I. Geographical delimitation of the tribe.

101 The Thonga tribe is composed of a group of Bantu peoples
131 settled on the eastern coast of South Africa, extending from
 — the neighbourhood of St Lucia Bay (28° Lat. S.) on the Natal
 Coast up to the Sabie River on the north (1). Thongas are to
 be found therefore in four of the present South African
 states : in Natal (Amatongaland), the Transvaal (Leydenbourg,
 Zoutpansberg and Waterberg districts), in Rhodesia, and chiefly
 in Portuguese East Africa (Lourenço Marques, Inhambane and
 Mozambique Company districts). The Thongas border on the
 Zulus and the Swazis southwards ; westwards on the Ba-Mbayi,
 Ba-Lauti and other Suto-Pedi clans in the Transvaal ; northwards
 on the Vendas and Ba-Nyai in the Zoutpansberg and Rhodesia,
 and on the Ndjaos near the Sabie ; and eastwards on the Thongas
 near Inhambane and on the Ba-Chopi, north of the mouth of the
 Limpopo.

101 The tribe comprises a certain number of clans. These clans
 form six groups, which speak the various dialects of the Thonga
 language.

133 (1) There are two rivers called Sabie in the Thonga Territory ; one is the Sabie of
 — the South, which flows in the Leydenburg district and joins the Nkomati not far from
 Kil. 53 of the Lourenço Marques-Transvaal line, and the other, that here referred to,
 which comes from Rhodesia and flows into the Indian Ocean not far from the 21° lat.
 South.

is favourable to the growth of certain plants. But by the side of the sand (*pfunge*) and the hillocks (*shitshunga*), here and there, is found a sort of black earth, containing a large proportion of vegetable detritus, in which maize, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, etc. thrive splendidly. *Nyaka* is the name given to this black soil: it is found at the foot of the hills which run from Lourenco Marques in the direction of Morakwen, and extends for a distance of some fourteen to eighteen miles. Several small springs rise at the bottom of this gentle slope, and tend to form a curious marsh, covered with beautiful tropical growths, of which gigantic palms (*mimale*) are the most striking. These are found in forests covering hundreds of acres, with an impenetrable undergrowth of ferns, enormous rushes and evergreen shrubs: magnificent palm groves, where apes, wild boars and large storks find a safe retreat.

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Between this marsh of primitive mud and the hills extends the arable tract of *nyaka*. There the fields are lovely; maize can be grown all the year round. In other places the *nyaka* is parched and dry, as in the valley of the Lower Nkomati, from the point where it leaves the Lebombo hills to the elbow of Magule. Here the annual overflow of the river deposits on the low-lying plains a fertilising slime, as is the case in Egypt. It is strange to see, during the winter, tufts of grass which were carried down by the stream, months before, caught in the branches of the trees and suspended some 15 to 20 feet above the ground!

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The sand of the coast belt is replaced in the hinterland of Matjolo, in the low level between the Nkomati and the Bila plain, etc. by another kind of soil called *hundjusi*. This is a reddish earth containing much sand, but much finer and more fertile than the sand proper.

On leaving the coast belt we reach the Lebombo and Longwe hills, which are composed of a hard reddish porphyraceous stone. Further West, a broad plain extends from the Lebombo to the Drakensberg Mountains, in some places consisting of a greyish or brownish clay, in other regions very dry and stony. The foot

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Phot. P. Berthoud.

Mimale palmtrees in the marshes near Lourenço Marques.

of the Drakensberg is very fertile, as water flows abundantly from the mountain gorges. Some rivers, however, on reaching the Low Country, dry up entirely, at least during the winter time.

- 193 conceptions were still current, it was considered as a feminine principle. This supposition is confirmed by the fact that *rivers* (nambu. pl. milambu) also have the feminine termination (I. p. 36, Note). I find the following names of rivers ending in *ti*: Nkomati, Nfoloti (Umbelosi), Nwebeti, Shalati, Timbati; the termination *etsi*, *edzi*, may be another form of the same suffix (Nwanetsi, Ntsatsi, Shingwedzi, Madzi, etc.). A very curious fact, which shows the same conception, is that the river which crosses the territory of the Tembe clan is called Mi-Tembe. I first thought this to be a plural form of the mu-mi class; but it is more natural to explain this *mi* as the feminine prefix (I) which means daughter of, as Migogwe, etc. (I. p. 352).
- 823 Crossing *rivers* is subject to a curious rule. It is taboo to bathe
 784 in the stream before crossing it; taboo also for the traveller to
 824 cook his food on the hither side of the river; he must first cross,
 789 and then take his meal. This rule is still universally observed by
 ● 133 waggon trekkers in South Africa. In this case there may be a
 reason for the taboo: South African rivers are apt to be swollen in
 a moment by sudden rain, and the crossing made impossible for
 days: the traveller therefore makes haste; he will have plenty of
 time to stop on the other side! When the river is dangerous, a
 Thonga will first chew (phora) a little of his *ndjao*, the root of a
 juncus, which is supposed to increase courage and to ensure
 victory over hostile influences. (See Part VI.)
- 823 Some *Lakes* and *Rivers* are believed to be inhabited by spirits,
 769 but not in the ordinary fetichistic way, in which a special spiritual
 776 being is incorporated with the natural object; these spirits are
 782 *psikwembo*, spirits of the deceased ancestors of the owners of the
 land, and are propitiated by their descendants. Should another
 clan have invaded the territory where these lakes are, and crocodiles
 threaten the fishermen, (p. 88) they will call some one belonging to
 the clan of the old possessors of the country and ask him to make
 an offering to appease *his* gods. This is the ordinary course, and
 the more closely we search the more completely these lake and

(1) A number of river names have the prefix *li* or *ri*, especially those which are of
 Sutho origin: Lebvubye. Ritabi (Letaba) Ritshindjele (Letaite), Rimbelule (Lepa-
 lula, Olifant). Others begin with *nwa*, *ma*, and may be ancient names of men.